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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 002074

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TH](#)
SUBJECT: THAILAND VS. YOUTUBE

REF: BANGKOK 02047

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. In the name of national security and preventing lese majeste, the interim Thai government began in the past few weeks to block several pro-Thaksin and/or anti-coup websites. But what began as a simple ban on a few sites has now turned into a confrontation between the Thai government and the popular YouTube site, as a result of a spate of crude and offensive videos denigrating the Thai king. Adding to the debate on free speech is the March 30 sentencing of a Swiss man to ten years imprisonment for lese majeste violations. The government is once again stuck with no good options: block the sites, and provoke international criticism for repressing free speech; ignore the sites, and be seen by Thais as ineffective in defending the honor of the king. End summary.

INTERESTING VIDEOS

12. (C) Reftel reports the recent blocking of controversial websites at the behest of the Ministry of Communications and Technology. The concerns over these mostly pro-Thaksin or anti-coup websites was nothing, however, compared to the reaction to videos insulting the King that were posted on YouTube beginning last week. The first controversial video clip featured the Thai king with drawings of feet superimposed over his head. (Note: The feet are considered unclean in Thailand and placing feet over a photograph of a face is a major affront. End note.) The poster of the clip identified himself as a American in his profile. MICT blocked access to the site and sought to make YouTube remove the offending video (reftel). The resulting press attention to the block apparently inspired a series of copy-cat offenders. There are currently perhaps a dozen clips disrespectful to the Thai monarchy on the site. These include one accusing him of being a pedophile, one with crudely sexual themes and allusions to "Brokeback Mountain," and one accusing him of murdering his brother, who died under mysterious circumstances 60 years ago. MICT efforts to block access have failed, as savvy internet users inside the country set up proxies outside of Thailand to access and post messages and clips of their own, many in support of the king. The messages posted in response to the offensive clips include an outpouring of rage, death threats against the posters, and, in the case of posters identifying themselves

as American, occasional anti-US diatribes.

FOREIGNERS NOT EXEMPT

13. (C) While internet discontent over website censorship in the name of the king simmered, the sentencing of a foreigner for a more conventional lese majeste offense has gotten renewed attention. Olivier Jufer, a 57-year old Swiss man found guilty of lese majeste charges, was sentenced to ten years on March 30. In a drunken stupor, he had spray-painted over the face on posters bearing an image of the Thai king. (According to one report, he was angry that new laws limiting the times when alcohol can be sold prevented him from buying beer.) His situation was the subject of one of the critical videos posted on YouTube, focusing on restrictions to freedom of speech in Thailand. (Note: As a message posted in response to the video correctly noted, the sentences for lese majeste charges are typically hortatory in nature and offenders are normally quickly pardoned by the king. End note.)

HOW FREE SHOULD FREE SPEECH BE?

14. (C) The Thai language press has been extremely circumspect in their reporting, due to fears of committing lese majeste themselves by describing the offensive videos. Still, press reaction from the English-language newspapers has been harsh. The government came in for criticism that its response to the provocative websites was both heavy-handed and ineffective. YouTube has been generally

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vilified. When the YouTube spokesman explained that videos critical of political figures like the US president are allowed on the site, one editorial writer described the "American-hosted video site's" response as "breath-takingly insulting." Another cartoon depicted a YouTube representative as a colonial official in a tropical helmet, saying, "...the generous white man has come to educate you about what you should or should not feel offended by..." At the same time, even some of these critics have urged government to recognize, as a practical matter, that it cannot control the discourse on the web. Human Rights Watch (HRW) drafted a letter to the prime minister urging the government to cease internet censorship for the sake of making political discourse available to all sections society at a time when Thailand is on its way to promulgate a new constitution.

COMMENT

15. (C) Many Thais respond to these insults to their King much the way many Americans respond to someone burning their flag. The response may even be closer to Muslim reaction to the infamous Danish cartoons. It is an emotional reaction that is not particularly susceptible to logical arguments about freedom of speech. The fact that several of these clips use profanity and sensational allegations of murder or sexual misconduct makes it that much worse. This is all a great headache for the government, which is, once again, stuck with no good options. Crack down on the offenders, and they risk international criticism for stifling free speech. Ignore the videos, and they will be accused of failing to defend the King. This is a particularly awkward accusation for the interim government; the coup leaders justified their overthrow of the former prime minister in part due to his lack of respect for the king.

BOYCE